Vincentian Footprints in China: The Lives, Deaths, and Legacies of François-Regis Clét, C.M., and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

Anthony E. Clark Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsullive6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
Vincentian Footprints in China: The Lives, Deaths, and Legacies of François-Regis Clét, C.M., and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

ANTHONY E. CLARK, PH.D.
The Lazarist enterprise in China, as did other Catholic missionary orders and congregations, encountered moments of conflict, both cultural and religious. Despite the antagonisms that accompanied Sino-Missionary exchange, however, there were also significant areas of confluence between Lazarist confrères and Chinese natives. At its worst, Lazarist-Chinese exchange engendered cultural disagreements that resulted in the extended suffering and martyrdoms of François-Regis Clét, C.M. (1748-1820), and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M. (1802-1840), or the strident French nationalism of missionaries such as Bishop Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier, C.M. (1837-1905), whose patent jingoism solicited Chinese suspicion. Favier, who arrived in China only a few decades after the cruel martyrdom of Perboyre, wrote of the French protectorate in Beijing:

Once more this incident has proved the necessity of the French protectorate of the Catholic missions, a protectorate which France has never abandoned and which the Church was never willing to take away from her. You will always see a consulate next to a church, and the tricolor sheltering the Catholic cross!... The admirals and officers compete with each other for the glory of the religion and the fatherland....¹

Remarks such as these, and even several by Perboyre and Clét, well represent the European-Catholic attitude often found in China, distinguished as it sometimes was by an admixture of the “Church Militant” and the “State Militant.”

In the wake of Clét and Perboryre’s martyrdoms in China, Sino-Missionary tensions continued, due mostly to cultural misunderstanding and rumors that the “Western gods” had disturbed the native deities of China — proclaimed responsible for a series of widespread famines on the northern plains. In a letter of 1882, we learn that the Daughters of Charity were reluctant to travel openly for fear of attacks.2 And in 1884, an attempted assault was made against the Lazarist mission in Tianjin. Indeed, there had already been a violent outbreak in the city against priests and sisters on 21 June 1870, when an angry Chinese mob killed twenty-one foreigners, including two Lazarist priests and ten Daughters of Charity.3 Missionaries who entered China following such incidents were predisposed to retain their image of “spiritual warfare,” and clear parallels between the early Church in Rome and the nascent Church in China were exploited in the rhetoric of incoming Vincentians. Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic missioners in China largely envisioned non-Christian temples as “places where the prince of darkness was worshipped.”4

But there was a much more pervasive character to the Lazarist mission in the Middle Kingdom, one that has left indelible footprints in the soil of China. These are the footprints of Chinese and Western confrères and sisters who operated orphanages for abandoned children (mostly girls), ran schools, established seminaries, offered medical services at Lazarist hospitals, and extended the Church’s reach through building new churches in previously un-missioned areas of China. After the deaths of Clét and Perboyre, increasing numbers of such charitable activities were inaugurated by new Vincentian arrivals; most of these were later destroyed during the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and then rebuilt again with reparation funds. The legacy of China’s two Lazarist martyr saints was deeply entrenched in a Vincentian ethos during the post-Boxer era reconstruction; Favier’s North Cathedral displayed a stone monument commemorating Saint Perboyre.

The advent of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 precipitated the comprehensive destruction and confiscation of Lazarist properties in China. Memorial stelae dedicated to Clét and Perboyre were targeted for destruction, and the European sons and daughters of Saint Vincent were expelled. In this study I shall briefly recount Clét and Perboryre’s

---


4 See “Lettre de la soeur Tourrel, Fille de la Charité, à la très honoree Mère Lamartinie; Yao-tcheou, maison de la Médaille miraculeuse, 5 mai 1897,” *Annales* 63 (1898): 88-90.
imprisonments and executions, discuss the legacies these two missionaries left behind both during and after China’s imperial era, and convey a handful of anecdotes regarding my recent personal encounters with their Vincentian footprints during recent trips to Beijing, Tianjin, and Wuhan.\(^5\)

**Lives and the Context of Persecution:**

The Vincentian footprints in China began with the first footsteps of young Vincent, who made tracks in the French soil of Gascony along with his four brothers and two sisters. After graduating in theology at Toulouse, Vincent was ordained a priest in 1600 and later, according to two perhaps specious letters, captured by Turkish pirates in 1605 and taken to Tunis, where he declared, though later seemed to retract, that he was sold into slavery.\(^6\) After 1607 the details of his life grow less vague, and in 1625 he at last founded the Congregation of the Mission (from which the present usage of the word “missionary” is derived), and missionary priests began to be trained and dispatched to foreign places. The early Vincentian missionaries had as their motto, taken from the Vulgate rendering of the gospel of Luke, “Evangelizare pauperibus misit me,” or “He sent me to preach the gospel to the poor.”\(^7\)

Vincent’s tracks led into the most impoverished areas of France, and the Vincentian footprints in China likewise strode into the country’s rural and urban destitution. Writing to one of his confreres, François-Regis Clét recalled that:

> Nearly all of our Christians are poor. Most of them live in wretched huts that afford but slight protection against cold and rain. At least two-thirds of them lack sufficient clothing to keep them warm during the long, intensely cold winters that we have here in the mountains. They own neither blankets nor mats, and can make themselves comfortable enough to sleep only by burrowing in the straw of their beds.\(^8\)

Also writing home from China, Jean-Gabriel Perboyre noted that not only were the Chinese he encountered, “the poorest of the poor,” but the Vincentians themselves were, “half

---

\(^5\) The research conducted for this study was made possible by the generous support of a DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute research grant, awarded by their Editorial Board and administered through the university’s Office of Mission and Values.


\(^7\) See the Vulgate, Luke 4:18-19.

nourished, living on rice and herbs.”9 The poverty of China was, as they witnessed, more intense even than in their native France.

Interestingly, it was a Jesuit who inspired Vincent to send missioners to Asia, and it was later the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 that stirred the Propaganda Fide to send large numbers of French Lazarists to China to occupy the now vacant Society missions. As Pierre Coste, C.M. (1873-1935), recounted in his three volume study of Saint Vincent, it was the popular reports of the Jesuit missionary to Asia, Alexander Rhodes, S.J. (1591-1660), that motivated Vincent to submit a letter to Rome in 1653, requesting permission for Lazarist priests to establish a mission in China. Vincent wrote:

Having learned of the surprising progress of the Christian faith in the kingdom of... China, we have felt our hearts burn with an ardent desire to go to the relief of those people who are buried in the darkness of error and are now beginning to hear the call of Jesus Christ the Sun of Justice.10

Typical of Vincent’s legendary pragmatism, he mentioned that the Congregation of the Mission already has:

9 Ibid., 145.
...in Paris at present three chosen priests, of well-known probity and utterly devoted to this hard and difficult cause, who are ready to undertake for Christ’s sake a journey full of dangers, and to labor all their life without respite in distant lands.¹¹

I quote from Vincent’s letter as there is no better description of the motives and experiences of those later Vincentians who at last made their way into the Middle Kingdom.

The first Vincentian arrived in China in 1699, but due to internecine conflicts between Catholic Orders in China, largely related to the unfortunate Rites Controversy, a collective Lazarist presence was not established in the country until 1785.¹² It was in the immediate wake of this era of tension and uncertainty that Clét and Perboyre fashioned new missionary tracks on Chinese soil. One can imagine these two French missionaries crouched between two unfriendly cultural contexts; behind them, in their native France, was the fanatic anticlericalism of the French Revolution (1787-1799), and before them, in China, was an increasingly anti-foreign government that had already illegalized Western missionaries and their religion.

Emperor Yongzheng’s 雍正 (r. 1722-1735) edict of 1727 is one example of official rhetoric condemning Catholic teachings, which he rebuked as, “without regard for the truth,” “injurious to the ways of the world,” and “heterodox.”¹³ It must be noted also that Clét and Perboyre were in deliberate violation of Qing 清代 (1644-1911) law when they entered China, and that local officials were surprisingly tolerant of their long and very apparent presence in the culturally conservative provinces of Jiangxi, Henan, and Hubei (then known as Huguang). It is quite remarkable that Chinese officials turned a blind eye to illegal foreign missionaries for as long as they did; Clét was in China for twenty-eight years, and Perboyre for five, before the local authorities finally moved to halt their illegal proselytization.

In the late-eighteenth century, the Buddhist millenarian White Lotus Sect 白蓮教 had reemerged in northern China (especially in Shandong), and led an anti-Qing rebellion. Christianity’s eschatological message appeared suspiciously similar to these rebels, and thus the court turned a more apprehensive eye toward foreigners who brought this evidently “heterodox” teaching.¹⁴ After the successful suppression of the White Lotus Rebellion (1794-1804), a Chinese Catholic was arrested in Beijing in 1811 carrying Western-language

¹¹ Ibid., 287.
¹² For a general account of the Rites Controversies, two sources render disparate views: for an account sensitive to the Jesuit perspective see George Minamaki, S.J., The Chinese Rites Controversy: From its Beginning to Modern Times (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986); and for a work more attuned to the Dominican view see J. S. Cummins, A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993).
documents for the local bishop. The court suspected the Catholics of anti-Qing espionage, and an imperial edict was published that both reasserted legal prohibitions against foreign missionaries and commanded, “all [Chinese] Christians to denounce their religion before the end of the year.”\(^\text{15}\) It was into this political climate that Clét and Perboyre persisted in administering the sacraments, preaching, and catechizing new believers. There is little mystery, then, as to what precipitated the arrests of these two Vincentians in 1819 and 1839, respectively.

**Deaths and the Tradition of Miracles:**

A severe anti-Christian persecution began in 1818, and François-Regis Clét was forced to hide in caves, wooded areas, and finally in the home of a Chinese Catholic family in Hunan province, where he remained for about six months.\(^\text{16}\) On 16 June 1819, Clét’s location was revealed by an apostate Catholic, and a group of Qing troops seized him, locked chains around his wrists, neck, and ankles, and placed him in prison. He was then subjected to a series of difficult court trials. As was normal procedure, Clét was instructed to beijing 背教, or apostatize by stepping on a cross; refusing this he was made to kneel on chains while his face was beaten with a leather strap until his jawbone was dislocated and his forehead was cruelly cut.\(^\text{17}\) Later, Clét was transferred to prisons at Kaifeng and Wuchang, where he was further interrogated and tortured. On the journey between Kaifeng and Wuchang, he was so badly beaten that a witness recorded his condition: his “clothes were stained


\(^\text{17}\) See Montgesty, *Two Vincentian Martyrs*, 81.
with blood from cuts and wounds caused by the blows and ill usage to which he had been subjected during the journey.” At last, on 18 February 1820, Clét was executed by slow strangulation, as the emperor had decreed, which was customary for “criminals” of his kind; a placard displayed beside him read, “Chuanxie jiaoshi” 傳邪教士, or “Transmitter of heterodox teachings.”

The circumstances of Jean-Gabriel Perboyre’s martyrdom, only two decades later, are remarkably similar to Clét’s. After living in China under the prolonged anxiety of consistent anti-Christian persecution, Perboyre was arrested, betrayed by a Christian member of his small mountain community in a village near Wuhan. He, like Clét, was transferred from city-to-city, and he underwent extended interrogations in which he was also charged to trample on a crucifix and reject his faith. As severe as Clét’s tortures had been, Perboyre’s were even more relentless. The former bishop of Ningbo, China, François-Alexis Rameaux, C.M. (1802-1845), recounted that Perboyre was, “interrogated and endured all the sufferings reserved for the worst criminals: he was made to kneel on iron chains, on pieces of broken crockery, and beaten in all sorts of ways, with the result that his flesh fell off him in strips.” Near the end of 1838 he was transferred to a final prison at Wuchang, where his foot was fastened by iron shackles to his cell wall and the resulting lack of circulation caused a portion to rot away.

---

18 Ibid., 82-83.
In a letter written in 1840, Rameaux mentions that during one of his examinations Perboyre was lashed with a bamboo stick 100 times on his body and seventy on his mouth.\(^2\) In addition, he was forced to drink steaming dog’s blood — a popular Chinese remedy against magic — dressed in his vestments and ridiculed; the characters “\textit{chuanxie jiaoshi}” were inscribed onto his face with an iron stylus.\(^2\) At last, on 11 December 1840, the emperor ratified Perboyre’s decree of punishment, and he was escorted to the execution ground where he was strangled with a chord that was tightened and released three times to protract his torment. Chinese hagiographies note that his death occurred on a Friday, from noon to three \textit{pm}, which connects his death to Christ’s Passion.\(^2\)

Among the more curious aspects of the hagiographical narratives attached to Perboyre are the miracle accounts that have acquired a noticeable patina of ancient Chinese cultural tropes. In the anonymous biography, \textit{Life of Blessed John Perboyre}, published in 1894, we find a Lazarist missionary’s letter quoted which reads, “When the servant of God was martyred, a large cross, luminous, and very distinctly formed appeared in the heavens.” We are informed, presumably in anticipation of a formal cause for beatification, that this luminous apparition was witnessed by both “Christians and pagans.”\(^2\)


\(^{22}\) Taiwan Roman Catholic Bishops Committee 天主教台灣地區主教團, \textit{Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan} 中華殉道聖人傳 \textit{[Biographies of China’s Catholic Martyr Saints]} (Taipei 臺北: Tianzhujiao Taiwan diqu zhujiao tuan 天主教台灣地區主教團, 2000), 135. Also see Anthony E. Clark, \textit{China’s Saints: Catholic Martyrdom During the Qing (1644-1911)} (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press and Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 163.

\(^{23}\) \textit{Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan}, 136.

\(^{24}\) Anonymous, \textit{Life of Blessed John Perboyre, Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyred in China, September 11th, 1840} (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1894), 256. Also see \textit{Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan}, 136.
description appears in nearly all Western accounts of Perboyre’s death, including several French hagiographies, and the Vatican’s *Processus* and *Positio* compiled for his possible canonization. The appearance of a luminous sign in the sky also figures in other Catholic martyrdom accounts in Chinese sources; indeed, such signs already existed in Chinese lore long before Christianity had entered the Middle Kingdom.

Just before four Dominican missionaries were executed in 1747 for “disseminating heterodox teachings,” we are told in various sources that an apparition of light appeared in their prison cell.\(^{25}\) The miracle happened while the four Spanish friars were awaiting final news of their sentence from Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735-1796), who had before the Rites debate been an enduring patron of the Catholic mission in his empire. Hagiographical accounts include an alleged witness of the phenomenon:

有一天，白主教和德神父，華神父三人；在念經的時候；監獄屋頂，忽然敞開，射出幾道火光；光雲一朵朵的徐徐下降，直到主教和神父的床邊；然後就升上。且自床邊透出一道光線，可以望見天空，真真美妙非常。

\(^{25}\) See Clark, *China’s Saints*, 78-81.
One day while Bishop Peter Sanz, O.P., Father Francis Serrano, O.P., and Father Joachim Royo, O.P., were reciting their prayers, the prison roof suddenly opened. Rays of lights shot through and a brilliant cloud slowly descended down beside their beds. Then it rose up and turned into a beam of light that rose from beside their beds and could be seen in the sky. It was truly remarkable!26

In subsequent Chinese narratives of Christian massacres during the Boxer Uprising (1898-1900), similar miracle accounts appear.

While twenty-six Catholics were being executed on 9 July 1900, in Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi, a group of nearly 200 faithful were gathered in prayer at a nearby church. A Chinese Catholic named Jia Luosa 賈羅撒 reported that:

7月9日下午四，五點鐘，我們正在念經，忽聞空中有美妙的秦樂聲，這樂聲從未聽過。在樂聲之處，出現了一潔白雲帶，由西南方向而來，漂往動方向。On July 9, at around 4:00 or 5:00 pm, we were reciting our prayers when we suddenly heard a magnificent sound of music that came out of the sky, such that has never before been heard. A pure white stream of light emitted from where the music was heard; it came from the southeast and drifted toward the northwest.27

The recorded apparitions of light connected to the deaths of the two Vincentian martyrs of China, and those of the mendicant Dominicans and Franciscans — who were also canonized in 2000 — conform to a long Chinese history of validating the distinctive significance of important persons. We see that as early as the second century BC, Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 Shiji 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian] contained similar examples.

26 Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan, 78.
27 Testimonial of Jia Luosa 賈羅撒, quoted in Qin Geping 秦格平, Taiyuan jiaoqu jianshi 太原教區簡史 [Concise History of the Catholic Diocese of Taiyuan] (Taiyuan 太原: Catholic Diocese of Taiyuan 太原天主教教區, 2008), 321.
In his biography of Emperor Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 206-195 BC), Sima Qian wrote that, “The First Emperor of Qin, repeatedly declaring that there were signs in the southeastern sky indicating the presence of a ‘Son of Heaven,’ decided to journey east to suppress the threat to his power.”28 Beams of light and curious emanations in the sky frequently appear in Chinese texts before missionaries entered China during the Tang dynasty 唐代 (618-907), and Catholic hagiographies during the Ming 明代 (1368-1644) and Qing perpetuated this trope.

Perboyre’s fellow Vincentian missioner in China, Jean-Henri Baldus, C.M. (1811-1869), who was made a bishop five years after Jean-Gabriel’s death, voiced skepticism regarding the authenticity of the luminous cross report. In 1851, Baldus wrote of his doubts in a letter, wherein he noted the credulity of uneducated Chinese Christians, and added that even European hagiographies share a “taste for the wonderful and miraculous” that often “leads to exaggeration.”29 But in the end, Baldus doubted his own uncertainty enough to allow mention of the miraculous apparition in the narratives prepared for Perboyre’s cause for beatification. Despite some persisting questions related to the accuracy of historical sources regarding Clét and Perboyre, their holiness and genuine concern for China, and the successful work of the mission, is generally accepted. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre was canonized a saint on 2 June 1996, and François-Regis Clét was canonized on 1 October 2000.

Beyond recounting the lives and deaths of these two martyrs, my principal aim here is to trace the later footprints of those Catholic missionaries and pilgrims who followed in their tracks, and locate what signs remain today of Clét and Perboyre’s Vincentian legacy in the Middle Kingdom. When the Maryknoll father, James A. Walsh, M.M. (1867-1936), made his first tour of China in 1918, one of the highlights was his visit to the place where Clét and Perboyre were executed in Wuchang, near the banks of the Yangze River. In his lengthy memoirs, Walsh described how an American Franciscan, Father Sylvestre Espelage, O.F.M. (1877-1940), escorted him to the Qing dynasty execution ground (shachang 杀场) where the two Vincentians were strangled. He wrote, “Here on a slight hillock we found the place where Blessed Perboyre was crucified, a place still used at times for executions.”30 During a recent trip to China I learned that neither the Vincentians in Beijing nor the local Chinese priests of Wuhan/Wuchang were able to note the precise location of the old imperial execution ground where these saints died; I shall return to this problem shortly.

**Vincentian Footprints Today:**

Only twelve years after Perboyre’s death in 1840, Vincentian missionaries were filing into China in increasing numbers. By 1852 twenty-five Lazarists served in China, and the

---


29 In Davitt, “Perboyre,” 227.

Vincentian seminary in Beijing was training thirty-six seminarians, many of whom were native Chinese who were keenly aware of Clét and Perboyre’s examples of sacrifice. The Congregation’s commitment to training native clergy, which fundamentally distinguished it from other Catholic Orders, resulted in a large number of Chinese Vincentian priests and brothers placed throughout China just prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. According to statistics for 1936-1937, there were 260 major seminarians and 875 minor seminarians in China; 637 priests had been educated by the Lazarists in China, 450 of whom joined the Congregation. Certainly, by the early-to-mid twentieth century the Vincentian presence in China had grown to considerable size, with several major centers: Beijing, Tianjin, and to some extent, Wuchang — where there was a growing Catholic sense that Clét and Perboyre were important local saints.

Noticeable Vincentian footprints remain in these three regions today, and more effort is needed to preserve what is left after the destructive Maoist era, from 1949 to 1976. In Beijing, the most eminent Vincentian was the portly bishop of the North Cathedral, Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier, who famously survived the brutal attacks against his church during the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and became an important local historian of Beijing. The other Vincentian center in Beijing was the Lazarist seminary dedicated to Saint Vincent at Zhalan Cemetery, where Matteo Ricci’s, S.J. (1552-1610), tomb is located. Today all that remains of Saint Vincent’s Seminary are two of the cloistered buildings beside Ricci’s tomb and the remains of a Marist convent. The old Vincentian seminary is called the “mouth”

---

32 Ibid.
33 Favier maintained an active writing schedule while serving as Beijing’s ordinary. Indeed, his book on the history and culture of Beijing remains one of the most useful scholarly sources available on this city’s late-imperial past. See Alphonse Favier, C.M., Pékin: Histoire. His most famous published work, however, is his journal, which he kept during the Boxer siege against the cathedral from June to August, 1900. See Alphonse Favier, C.M., The Heart of Pekin: Bishop A. Favier’s Diary of the Siege, May-August, 1900, J. Freri, ed. (Boston: Marlier & Co., 1901).
building, as its plan is shaped like the Chinese character *kou*, or 口 “mouth,” and the Marist convent is identified as the “mountain” building, since it is shaped like the graph *shan* 山.34 The Jesuit cemetery, Marist convent, and Vincentian seminary all now comprise the Beijing Communist Party School.

As an historian what interested me most while tracing the Vincentian history of Beijing was the question of what happened to the materials of the seminary’s library during the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966-1976). In 1966, Red Guards from a nearby architectural school attacked the cemetery and buildings with the intention of destroying all of the historic tombstones and structures. However, according to official accounts, an employee “came up with the idea of burying the tombstones deeply under the slogan of ‘forever buried, never stand up again.’”35 The Red Guards were assuaged; the

34 Two works provide a good summary of the history of Zhalan Jesuit Cemetery and associated Catholic buildings. See Lin Hua 林華, ed., *Lishi yihen Li Madou ji Ming Qing xifang chuanjiaoshi mudi* 历史遗迹利玛窦及明清西方传教士墓地 [Historical Traces of Matteo Ricci and the Ming-Qing Dynasties Western Missionary Tomb] (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe 中国人大大学出版社, 1994); and Beijing Administrative College, eds., *History Recorded by the Stones: The 400 Year Story of the Cemetery of Matteo Ricci and Other Foreign Missionaries* (Beijing: Beijing Administrative College, 2010).

35 Beijing Administrative College, *History Recorded by the Stones*, 89.
tombstones were buried beneath the ground and the buildings were left standing. After the Cultural Revolution, the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs ordered that the cemetery and buildings be restored, though the contents of the Vincentian seminary library were already gone. It is widely known that the Vincentian library at North Cathedral was relocated to the National Library of China, where they are still inaccessible without special permission. The library of Saint Vincent’s Seminary, however, was divided and the location of its contents was mostly forgotten. After some inquiries I discovered that a portion of the Western language collection of the seminary has survived the Maoist era, and is now located in the new library of the Catholic Seminary of the Diocese of Beijing 北京教區神哲學院, which
began construction in 2001. Unfortunately, the old Lazarist books are not well catalogued and are rarely used, as the seminarians do not read French.36

The second center of Vincentian activity before 1949 was the coastal city of Tianjin, where the famous Xikai Cathedral 西開教堂 (a.k.a., Saint Joseph’s) was built by French Lazarists in 1913. Tianjin is where the notable Vincentian missionary Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe, C.M. (1877-1940), lived, and where he formed a small movement to liberate the Catholic community in China from foreign control. Lebbe and his Maryknoll friend, Anthony Cotta, M.M. (1872-1957), were outspoken critics of European dominance in the China mission, and Lebbe himself became a Chinese citizen to better advocate a more indigenous hierarchy.37 The bishop’s residence beside the church held one of China’s finest Western and Chinese-language Catholic libraries.

By 1951 the European Vincentians were exiled from China as “imperialist counterrevolutionaries,” and in the haste of their withdrawal they left behind precious books; the Chinese priests who remained had little time to attend to the rare books, photos,

36 For a concise history of the present Beijing seminary see: Catholic Seminary of Beijing Diocese 北京教區神哲學院 (Beijing: Diocese of Beijing 北京教區, 2004).

37 See Jacques Leclercq, Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe, George Lamb, trans. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958). Father Anthony Cotta was a former Vincentian. The anonymously written and published Chinese work, Lei Mingyuan yu Zhongguo 雷鳴遠與中國 [Vincent Lebbe and China], is widely read today in northern China, and serves to inspire many Chinese Catholics.
and documents of the library and archive. The bishop’s residence was protected until 1966, when Red Guards stormed the cathedral library, carried the most accessible books out onto the street and burned them in front of the cathedral while chanting Maoist slogans. The radicals only took the first few shelves of books, however, consisting mostly of bibles, which are less rare than the works they fortuitously left behind.38

For several decades now local authorities have restricted access to the site of this old library, and scholars and foreign clergy have been unable to verify rumors that much of this Vincentian library remains intact. In a 2011 trip to Tianjin I met with the rector of Xikai Cathedral, Father Leo Zhang Liang 張良神父, who, after extended negotiation, granted me permission to conduct preliminary research on the history of what remains of the Vincentian library, and to produce an initial catalog of the library’s present condition and contents.

With the exception of the 1966 Red Guard destruction, the Vincentian library and archive at Tianjin has remained mostly locked and untouched since foreign missionaries left in the 1950s; the materials have suffered from dust, vermin, and mildew, and most of the shelves are beginning to collapse from long-neglect. Based on a preliminary estimate of the library’s contents, there are nearly 500 linear feet of books, more than 5,000 volumes, rare maps, and scattered documents left by the Vincentians in 1951. The library remains located on the original two floors of the bishop’s residence, and is monitored by the cathedral’s rector and the chairman of the Tianjin Catholic Patriotic Association. Among the materials is a complete series of *Le Bulletin Catholique de Pékin*, a series of the *Analles des Franciscaines Missionaires de Marie*, the annuals from the former Tianjin Vincentian school, Saint Joseph’s, and a large number of books related to the Vincentian mission in China. Also of significance is the library’s collection of Chinese-language Catholic materials, some dating to the late-imperial era.

---

38 Interview with Father Leo Zhang Liang 張良神父, at Xikai Cathedral, Tianjin, China, 26 October 2011.
Bearing in mind that Clét and Perboyre’s memory still influences Catholic culture in Beijing and Tianjin, I also visited Wuchang in 2008 (now incorporated into the city boundaries of Wuhan), where they were martyred in 1820 and 1840 respectively. While in Wuhan, presently celebrated mainly for its central role in the anti-Qing movements of 1911, I was provided with the vicar general/cathedral rector’s car and driver, and escorted to a location “believed to be near the old Qing execution ground.” As the priests of Wuhan no longer know precisely where the execution ground was, they routinely send pilgrims or visiting scholars to what is currently a Catholic elderly residence in Wuchang, actually quite distant from the location where Clét and Perboyre were martyred.

I began to interview the older occupants of the neighborhood, and was recommended by residents to visit a certain woman, Gan Yulan 甘玉蘭, who, as they informed me, was alive during the closing years of the Qing, and lived near the site of the Qingchao shachang 清朝殺, or “Qing dynasty execution ground.” Based on extant sources we know that the execution ground was located near Lake Sha (shahu 沙湖), not too far from Big Mountain (hongshan 洪山: this location is mistakenly identified in Western sources as “Red Mountain” because the name sounds similar — hongshan 紅山), where their graves were situated. Gan Yulan, who was too frail to accompany me and still constrained by bound feet, provided the exact location of Wuchang’s execution ground where Clét and Perboyre were strangled to death; the elderly residents at the location also confirmed the precise site of the shachang.

The old execution ground is nestled within an area called Phoenix Hill (Fenghuangshan 凤凰山), and is now obscured from view behind a tall apartment building; the current address is Wuhan 武漢, Wuchangqu 武昌區, Zhongshan Road 中山路, Number 313 三一

39 The vicar general/cathedral rector was Father Shen Guoan 沈國安; it was also Father Shen who informed me that the precise location of where Clét and Perboyre were executed was no longer known. Interview with Father Shen Guoan, St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Wuhan, China, 24 November 2008.
40 For an extended Chinese account of Perboyre’s execution see Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan, 132-238. The entry is under Perboyre’s Chinese name, Dong Wenhua 董文學.
The aged door guard of the apartment complex was enthusiastic in his recollections, recalling stories he had heard about the executions conducted there during the late-imperial era.

The second matter I investigated was the present location of Clét and Perboyre’s commemorative gravestones, hidden by a local Catholic during the Maoist era. As was customary, their bodies remained briefly on display after their executions — Perboyre’s corpse, for example, was not removed from its gibbet until the following day. They were eventually taken by local Catholics for funerary services, then buried at Big Mountain (洪山) and marked with memorial stelae. Later, their bodies were removed to the Lazarist Motherhouse (La Maison-Mère) in Paris. This caused considerable disquiet among the Chinese Catholic community that had hoped to keep their bodies in China for veneration by the native Church. The gravestones were relocated to the home of a local Catholic and their whereabouts forgotten — or deliberately concealed — until after the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese bishop of Wuhan, Bernadine Dong Guangqing, O.F.M. (1917-2007), conducted a search for the commemorative stelae, and commissioned their restoration and installation at the Wuchang Huayuanshan Catholic Church and Seminary. The monuments are now displayed in the seminary courtyard near the central statue of Our Lady, and the seminarians routinely place flowers near the stelae and invoke the intercession of Clét and Perboyre in their private prayers. In an interview with Father Joseph Peng Xin, a local priest, I was informed that local authorities are comparatively “strict” regarding Catholic activities in that diocese. He noted that any

---

41 See André Sylvestre, C.M., *John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.: China’s First Saint*, John E. Rybolt, C.M., trans. (Strasbourg: Éditions du Signe, 1996), 32. Bernadine Dong Guangqing was the first bishop ordained without a papal mandate, and was made bishop of the diocese of Hankou in 1958 by the Patriotic Catholic Association. He was appointed president of the Patriotic Catholic Association of Wuhan, vice president of the National Administrative Committee of the Chinese Catholic Church, and was a member of the Chinese University of Catholic Bishops.
visits to the stelae, and especially the location of Clét and Perboyre’s martyrdoms, should remain discrete, and should not involve more than one or two foreigners at a time.42

Conclusion:
The former prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), once said that, “Martyrdom does not end something, it is only a beginning.” If you talk with Chinese Catholics in formerly Vincentian areas such as Beijing and Tianjin, or in Wuchang, where the blood of two Vincentian saints was spilled, they will often conjure Tertullian’s (ca. 160-225) adage that, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” Beijing’s North Church, once a Vincentian Cathedral, is the largest and most active parish in the capital. The Diocese of Tianjin now boasts over 100,000 Catholics, and Xikai cathedral is rumored to be the largest parish in China. Local Catholics note that the present growth of Catholicism in the city results principally from the witness of the more than sixty Tianjin martyrs of 1870, many of whom were Vincentian priests and nuns.43 When I met with the seminarians in Wuchang, I was told that Saints Clét and Perboyre are effectively the spiritual fathers of Wuhan’s Catholic community.

In a speech given at the University of Chicago in 1933, the famous May Fourth intellectual, Hu Shi (1891-1962), asserted that, “It is true that the Chinese are not so religious as the Hindus, or even as the Japanese; and they are certainly not so religious as the Christian missionaries desire them to be.”44 Hu’s remark was once considered prophetic, but is now widely touted as an example of misguided pessimism regarding China’s ability to incorporate Christianity into its culture. There are still Vincentians in China today. The Our Lady of China Catholic community at Beijing’s British Embassy (Kerry Center) is pastored by a Vincentian. Occasionally an old Chinese priest will let you know that he is,
“a priest of the Mission.” These Lazarists continue in the footsteps of their spiritual father, Vincent de Paul. In a letter to Louis Abelly (1603-1691), vicar general of Bayonne, Vincent wrote what I think best describes the legacies left behind by Saints Clét and Perboyre: “Our Lord and the saints accomplished more by suffering than by acting.”45

---

St. Vincent de Paul, St. François-Regis Clét, C.M., and St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu
Alexander Rhodes, S.J.

Courtesy of Archives Missions Etrangères de Paris, Paris, France
St. François-Regis Clét, C.M., beside his cross.

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu
Luminous Light Miracle of St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu
Luminous Light Miracle of the four Dominican martyrs of China.

Courtesy of Archives Missions Etrangères de Paris, Paris, France
Luminous Light Miracle of the Franciscan martyrs of Shanxi, China.

Courtesy of Archivio Curia Generalizia Ordo Fratrum Minorum, Rome, Italy
Execution ground (shachang 殺場) of François-Regis Clét and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre.

Courtesy of Archives Missions Etrangères de Paris, Paris, France
Beijing North Church/Cathedral (a.k.a., Xishiku jiaotang 西什庫教堂), 1937 (top); and a portrait of Bishop Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier, C.M.

Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
1) Diagrammatic drawing of St. Vincent Seminary at Zhalan Cemetery, Beijing (detail);  
2) Tomb of Matteo Ricci, S.J., Zhalan Cemetery, Beijing

All Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
3) Vincentian Seminary – called the “Mouth” Building (kou 口), Zhalan Cemetery, Beijing;  
4) Marist Convent – called the “Mountain” Building (shan 山), Zhalan Cemetery, Beijing.

All Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
Books from the Zhalan Vincentian Seminary Library, now at the Beijing Diocesan Library. Photograph by author.

Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
1) Xikai Cathedral (a.k.a., Saint Joseph’s). Photograph by author;
2) Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe, C.M., at Tianjin, China

All Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
3) Bishop’s Residence at Xikai Cathedral. Photograph by author.

All Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA
Red Guard attack on Xikai Cathedral, Tianjin 1966.

Anthony E. Clark Private Collection
Remains of the Vincentian Library in the Bishop’s Residence, Tianjin; and Anthony Clark assessing the Vincentian Library in the Bishop’s Residence, Tianjin.

*Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA; and Anthony E. Clark Private Collection, respectively*
Catholic woman, Gan Yulan, 甘玉蘭 and Anthony Clark, Wuchang.

*Anthony E. Clark Private Collection*
Execution ground of François-Regis Clét and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre (photograph taken in 2008).

*Anthony E. Clark Private Collection*
Anthony Clark beside the memorial stelae of François-Regis Clét and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, at the Catholic Seminary, Wuchang.

Anthony E. Clark Private Collection
Chinese Christians beside the grave of Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Wuchang, ca. 1895.

Courtesy of History of Christianity in China Archive, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA